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JFK's Unfashionable Statesman

CHESTER BOWLES
New Dealer in the Cold War

By Howard B. Schaffer
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By Michael R. Beschloss

SINCE THE start of his presidential campaign, Bill Clinton has made much of his admiration for John Kennedy's idealism about how the rest of the world should think about America. As Howard B. Schaffer's fine and balanced volume demonstrates, the President would probably feel more comfortable with the instincts of JFK's chief campaign foreign policy adviser, the former Connecticut governor and congressman Chester Bowles.

In 1960, Kennedy endorsed such things as human rights and aid to the Third World not least as a means of attracting Democratic liberals who were suspicious about his candidacy, rationalizing such positions to conservatives as a powerful weapon against the Russians. Showing intellectual conviction that 30 years later seems poignantly antique, Bowles supported them without calculation. The differences between the two men, papered over during the campaign, overwhelmed their relationship the following year. In the "Thanksgiving mas-

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Chester Bowles with President Kennedy in 1961

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sacre" of 1961, JFK fired Bowles from his job as number two man in the State Department, effectively ending Bowles's political career. Today Kennedy is honored as the idealist and Bowles is virtually forgotten.

Born in Springfield, Mass., in 1901, son of an orthodox Republican businessman, Bowles went to Choate and Yale and then, with \$5,000 of borrowed money, founded the highly successful New York advertising firm of Benton & Bowles, where he developed the idea of packaging weekly radio programs with regular casts, formats and sponsors, such as "The Maxwell House Showboat" and

"The Palmolive Beauty Box Theater." A colleague recalled that as an ad man, Bowles encouraged people "not to worry if their ideas seemed a little screwy at the beginning, but he could stimulate them to try something new and different and not worry if it didn't sound like the standard way of doing things." By the mid-1930s, Bowles was earning \$250,000 a year.

Later, when political foes scored him as a dreamer, Bowles reminded them that he had met a large payroll at the nadir of the Great Depression. But as Schaffer, a retired Foreign Service Officer, notes, Bowles oth-

erwise "did not welcome efforts to recall his business background once he entered public life." Dean Acheson, who later led the Democratic Party's opposing school of thought on foreign policy, acidly wrote a friend in 1958 that Bowles's "time spent in the advertising business seems to create a permanent deformity, like the Chinese habit of foot binding." Schaffer writes that Bowles later concluded that he would have been "happier and more effective" had he entered politics directly after Yale. While he recognized that his money "had assured him greater independence and had paved the way for the careers that opened for him later, he did not want to identify himself with the rich and seemed almost ashamed of his prosperity."

The Depression moved Bowles to support radical changes in American politics and economics, perhaps contributing to his divorce from his socialite first wife Julia Fisk and remarriage to Dorothy Stebbins, a vivacious activist who shared his political interests. As a rare New Deal businessman, he was well positioned to become a key figure in the wartime Office of Price Administration. He sought the Democratic nomination for governor of Connecticut in 1946, lost, and then won the job two years later, forging the kind of social reform agenda that won national attention.

Defeated for reelection, partly for his willingness to alienate special interests like doctors and fishermen, he asked President Harry Truman for the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi. Truman replied that India was "jammed with poor people and cows wandering around the streets, with doctors and people sitting on hot coals and bathing in the Ganges" and that he "did not realize that anybody thought it was important." After appointing Bowles ambassador, Truman said, "The first thing you've got to do is to find out if [Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal] Nehru is a Communist."

In New Delhi, Bowles was in his element, trying to prod the Indians for land reform,